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# Summary

## **Tellings of the Life Apostolic**

### *Six Generations on the Role of the Apostolic Society in Their Lives*

The Apostolic Society (het Apostolisch Genootschap) is currently the largest liberal religious community of the Netherlands; yet it is relatively unknown. Founded in 1951, it is quite young, but it has its roots in an older religious community. Today, the Apostolic Society positions itself as religious-humanistic. It is led by an apostle; the spiritual leader who writes a weekly pastoral letter (the weekly letter) that forms the centre of the Sunday morning services. The Society is also characterised by a close-knit community culture. In its short existence, major changes have taken place, including in the position of the apostle, the image of God and the community culture. This means that the youngest members grew up in a different Apostolic Society than the oldest members, who themselves lived through all these different changes. Several publications on the historical developments within the Apostolic Society have appeared, as well as an ego document published in 2020, but little is known about how these developments have been experienced by the members themselves and how they currently experience the role of the Apostolic Society in their lives. In this dissertation, I give a voice to various members through oral history by investigating the following research question: *How have members from six social generations experienced the role of the Apostolic Society in their lives over time?*

In **chapter 2** I give an overview of the current Apostolic Society and its history. The Apostolic Society has its origins in the Catholic Apostolic Church that arose in Great Britain around 1830, which was led by twelve apostles. They sought to unite all the churches in the world to prepare for the imminent return of the Lord, which would happen before the last of the twelve apostles was to die. Through various missionary activities, the apostolic movement came to the Netherlands via Hamburg in 1863. In 1902 the Hersteld Apostolische Zendinggemeente in de Eenheid der Apostelen (HAZEA – Restored Apostolic Missionary Congregation in the Unity of the Apostles) arose after several schisms. From 1910, this congregation was led by apostle J.H. van Oosbree (apostle 1910-1946). During his 36-year apostolate, the HAZEA grew from 7,400 to about 30,000 members. In this period, the role of the apostle became more central: he was seen as the living ‘Mouth of God’, which pushed the Bible more into the background. When Van Oosbree died in 1946, he himself appointed his successor, which was not in accordance with the regulations of the HAZEA. Yet nearly 90% of the members decided to accept his ‘calling’ of L. Slok (hereinafter: Slok Sr., apostle 1946-1984). This led to a rupture with the HAZEA. After the court case regarding the succession had been lost, Slok Sr. founded ‘The Apostolic Society’ on December 28, 1951. He made major changes in apostolic thought in a short period of time. For example: he distanced himself from the belief in the Second Coming and created a new image of God, in which God should be experienced through people. Since he, as apostle, was the first person responsible to bring this about, many members perceived him as the contemporary embodiment of Christ. When Slok Sr. died in 1984, he had appointed his son J.L. Slok (hereinafter: Slok Jr.) as his successor (apostle 1984-2001) by will. Several months after his ‘calling’, Slok Jr. distanced himself from the epithet of Christ. This step had consequences both for the apostolic ideology and for the relationship between the apostle and the members. Slok Jr. made the organisation less hierarchical, more transparent, and positioned the Apostolic Society within the larger Dutch society. In 2001 he appointed Dick Riemers (apostle 2001-2011) as his successor, who aimed for a ‘dialogue at eye level’ with the members. He and his successor Wiegman (apostle since 2011) continued the path initiated by Slok Jr., with a less central role for the apostle and more openness to the outside world.

In **chapter 3**, I elaborate the angle of my research on the basis of ‘social generation’, a sociological concept that refers to a group of people who grew up in the same socio-historical circumstances. The theory was posed by Karl Mannheim, who argues that societal developments during the *formative period*, when one is between fifteen and twenty-five years old, have a major influence on the value and norms system that one develops. Henk Becker applied Mannheim’s generational theory to the Dutch socio-economic context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He distinguishes six generations: the Pre-war Generation (born between 1910-1930), the Silent Generation (1930-1945), the Protest Generation (1945-1955), the Lost Generation (1955-1970), the Pragmatic Generation (1970-1985), and the Millennials (1985-2000). For each of these social generations I outline both the social and the apostolic context during the formative period of the members. This helps to contextualise their personal experiences. During the formative period of the members of the Pre-war Generation and the Silent Generation the social and apostolic context largely corresponded: the social reconstruction after the Second World War largely coincided with the apostolic ‘reconstruction’ after the schism in 1946. Furthermore, both contexts were characterised by charismatic, strong leaders. In addition, it was widely accepted that people spent most of their time ‘in their own circle’, since the Dutch society was largely pillarised. During the formative period of the members of the Protest Generation, the developments of both contexts started to move out of synch. The Apostolic Society responded with reticence to the many social developments that took place in this period (the de-pillarisation, the second feminist wave, the sexual revolution and increasing prosperity). Under the authoritarian leadership of Slok Sr. a normative culture developed with a strong emphasis on clothing and rules of conduct. This continued during the formative period of the Lost Generation. During the formative period of the members of the Pragmatic Generation, major cultural changes took place under the leadership of Slok Jr. He managed to transform the Apostolic Society from a norm-driven to a value-driven culture. Women were given the same position as men and space was created for individual religious expression. As a result, both contexts began to run more parallel again. For the Millennials, there is currently much overlap between the social and apostolic context.

In **chapter 4**, I highlight my research methods based on a qualitative research cycle. This consists of: 1) the design cycle; 2) the data collection cycle; 3) the analysis cycle; and 4) the writing cycle. In the **research design** I explain my chosen *oral history* approach. I discuss the differences in approach during the pilot study and the subsequent main study. In the **data collection** I substantiate my choice for a stratified purposeful sampling strategy to select interviewees, to balance homogeneity and variation. A total of 27 interviews were conducted: seven with members of the oldest generation and four with members of the five subsequent generations. The interviews lasted between one and a half and six hours and were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 70 hours of audio and half a million words transcribed. The **data analysis** started with several coding cycles in software programme ATLAS.ti from which ultimately three major themes emerged: the apostle, the image of God, and the community. These three themes each form their own empirical chapter in which I present key data by means of selected text fragments from the interviewees: the **data presentation**. I close this chapter with a reflection on my own positionality during each of these four research cycles.

In **chapter 5** I examine – per apostle’s tenure – the way in which the interviewees describe the meaning of the apostle in their lives, and how it has changed over the years. I use Max Weber’s *Herrschaftssoziologie* to characterise the leadership of the apostles. Because of the way in which the interviewees talk about Slok Sr. (apostle from 1946-1984), his type of leadership can best be described as charismatic authority. Several interviewees from the older generations point out that Slok Sr. was able to make them rise above their everyday routines. As the ‘Living Norm’, he gave meaning and direction to their lives. Especially during the first period of his apostolate he was able to stir, inspire and connect. Most interviewees have different feelings about the second half of his apostolate. In the 1970s his directive, prescriptive leadership style was less compatible with societal developments. The interviewees all had different ways of dealing with this discrepancy: some used forms of silent resistance, others tried to consciously choose what they wanted to commit to and accepted the rest as non-essential, and yet another interviewee indicated that she was naive at the time. The interviewees experienced his successor and son Slok Jr. (apostle 1984-2001) as less

charismatic and more business-like. According to the interviewees, he immediately indicated that being apostolic entailed a responsibility to bring about the Christ-mindedness: it should not solely depend on the apostle. However, the intended cultural change did not come about overnight and the interviewees only noticed a change in the 1990s. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, under the leadership of Riemers (apostle 2001-2011), the position of the apostle was perceived as fundamentally different: interviewees therefore speak of ‘the apostles Slok’ and the two apostles afterwards. Where the apostles Slok stood on a pedestal for the interviewees, the apostles Riemers and Wiegman are more approachable. For example, the younger interviewees tell how they send apostle Wiegman WhatsApp messages. For the older generations, the devotion previously felt for the apostle has faded to reverence. The changes that have taken place in the way the interviewees relate to the apostle can be most succinctly described as: **from charismatic leader to approachable WhatsApp friend.**

In **chapter 6** I investigate – per social generation – the way in which the interviewees interpret their image of God, and whether they see themselves and the Apostolic Society as religious and / or humanistic. Although some interviewees of the oldest generation still remember that they used to think that God was in heaven, none of the interviewees hold a theistic view of God today. Several interviewees struggle with the word ‘God’ and some would prefer not to use it at all.

For most of the interviewees of the oldest two generations, Slok Sr. was important in the formation of their image of God. Almost all of them enthusiastically remember the national gathering in the Goffert Stadium in 1949, where Slok Sr. presented a new image of God with the device ‘We are here for God’. Herewith, the former idea of God was replaced by the ideal to make God’s power of love a living reality in society. As a result, the emphasis shifted from an abstract God to the human responsibility to make God experienceable to others. Interviewees from the middle two generations tell how this new ideal, ‘God as human’, was often translated as ‘God as apostle’. The fact that successor Slok Jr. directly distanced himself from the idea of an apostle as ‘the contemporary embodiment of Christ’ had implications both for their image of God as well as for their feelings of religiosity. Where feelings of wonder and of being connected were previously mainly aroused by the apostle, they currently arise

more from an awe for creation and nature, which the interviewees also describe with 'God as a creative power'. All the interviewees of the older four generations approve that Slok Jr. distanced himself from being the contemporary Christ, but some have the feeling that since then, something is missing: a sense of inspiration, emotion and adoration. Interviewees of the last two generations mainly describe what they do not believe in (neither in anything supernatural, nor in an ecclesiastical image of God) and have difficulty explaining what they do believe in. This is also reflected in interviews with some members of the older generations.

It seems there are no major generational differences in the way people talk about God today. The different conceptions of God can be found throughout all generations, such as 'God as a creative power', 'God as human', 'God as a power of love', or a combination of these. All interviewees agree that the Apostolic Society is now more humanistic than religious. The developments of the interviewees' image of God relate to Weber's disenchantment, or *Entzauberung*. Nowadays, apostolics hardly make a distinction between a humane relationship with one's fellow man based on humanistic principles, and a spiritually inspired relationship with one's fellow man as a 'friendly face of God'. Some find this a positive development, while others fear that the Apostolic Society is losing a distinguishing feature. They feel that the concept of God has faded too much. The changes that have taken place in the interviewees' image of God can be most succinctly described as: **from 'God as apostle' to religious humanism.**

In **chapter 7** I examine the way in which the interviewees describe the role of the apostolic community in their lives. I present their experiences on the basis of five elements that a community needs in order to survive: its distinctiveness, shared stories of faith, shared experiences, commitment, and communal rituals. The interviews show that all five elements have become less pronounced over time. The interviewees who experienced the early days of Slok Sr. speak of a great shared ideal, in which the apostolic community was central to their lives – something that felt very natural back then, but which they would not want to return to now. The almost daily community activities, the social control, and the limited interaction with non-apostolics, largely corresponded to the pillarised society of the fifties and sixties. The strongly felt need to belong to the community (belonging) went hand in hand with the guiding beliefs of



Slok Sr. (believing). But from the 1970s onwards, a difference arose between the apostolic and the social context, causing several interviewees to speak of 'two different worlds'. The two separate worlds created feelings of confusion and conflict for some interviewees. The members of the third and the fourth generation discuss these feelings more often and more intensely than the older generations, who speak more leniently about this period.

From the 1990s onwards, these two different worlds felt less out of synch as a result of all the reforms that Slok Jr. initiated. Simultaneously, all five community elements began to weaken and the religious component slowly shifted to the background. The individual experience of something transcendent, or of a shared *effervescence collective*, which was regularly experienced by the members of the oldest four generations during the period of Slok Sr., have hardly occurred for them since the beginning of this century. As a result, the religious experience (believing) has become less strong. The mutual involvement (belonging) that has traditionally been an important characteristic of the Apostolic Society has also declined. Where life for the oldest generations was mainly centred around the community in the past, the commitment and the willingness to do something for the apostolic community have diminished, especially among the two youngest generations. The changes that have taken place in the way interviewees relate to the apostolic community can be most succinctly described as: **from full dedication to belonging without believing**.

In **chapter 8** I show that the three experienced changes in the Apostolic Society (the position of the apostle, the image of God, and the community) have overlap with processes of change in other religious communities. To demonstrate this, I use the theory of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, which is based on what Charles Taylor calls 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture'. This theory states that in recent decades a major cultural change has taken place in modern western society. It is a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations ('life-as'), and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences ('subjective-life'). They argue that this shift has become the defining cultural development of modern western culture, also in the field of religion. They make a distinction between 'life-as religion', which involves subordinating subjective-life to the



‘higher’ authority of transcendent meaning, goodness and truth, and ‘subjective-life spirituality’, which invokes the sacred in the cultivation of unique subjective-life.

From the stories of the interviewees it appears that such a turn has also taken place in the Apostolic Society. When the older interviewees talk about their experiences in the last century, the testimony takes on a strong semblance of ‘life-as religion’: Slok Sr. was the ‘Living Norm’ and there were clearly prescribed role patterns about how to be a good ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ or a good child. However, as the experiences of the older interviewees show, this ‘life-as’ attitude of the Apostolic Society began to cause problems in the 1970s when the subjective turn was taking place in the Netherlands. According to interviewees, the Apostolic Society resisted this turn for a long time. Only in the 1990s did they experience reforms that were in line with the subjective turn. As with many denominations, the Apostolic Society has struggled ever since with membership decline and an ageing population. The experiences of the interviewees in the present century take on several characteristics of a ‘subjective-life spirituality’. According to the interviewees, being apostolic comes with less prescribed guidelines or codes of conduct, and there is much space for individual religious experiences. During Slok Sr. the question was mainly: ‘What can I contribute to the Apostolic Society?’ This has changed into: ‘What can the Apostolic Society offer me?’ The apostle no longer tells people how they should lead their lives (‘life-as’), but it is up to the members themselves to give meaning and direction to their lives (‘subjective-life’). However, a full transition to a ‘subjective-life spirituality’ has not yet been made and seems to be hampered by multiple ‘life-as’ elements that are anchored in the apostolic culture and are sometimes difficult to reconcile with the current presentation outwards. Some examples are: the stress on tight community centredness, the still somewhat hierarchical organisational structure, the position of the apostle, the particular apostolic language, and the distinct manners and rituals, with their roots in former belief systems that are difficult to see for outsiders and young members. Therefore, the present Apostolic Society is not a ‘life-as religion’, nor a ‘subjective-life spirituality’.

**Conclusion:** In this research I have collected unique data with oral history techniques that reveal for the first time how 27 members of six social generations experienced the historical developments of the Apostolic Society in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The stories of all interviewees together show that major changes have taken place on three related – and for the Apostolic Society essential – themes that have made the experience of being apostolic less profound. The way in which these changes are experienced differ from person to person, but the generational lens helps to interpret the different stories by placing the individual experiences in the social context. This reveals to what extent the developments in the Apostolic Society were in or out of synch with social developments.

With this research I have shown how the apostolic interviewees – all unique people with a shared past – have found their own ways to deal with this shared past. Their personal stories have broadened the view of the apostolic history.